

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS!

Arts at the heart of the city

By MONICA YOUNG
Special to the News & Record

Recreation doesn't mean the same thing to everyone. Some play basketball, soccer or tennis. Some pick bocce or croquet. Some stroll through a garden or park. And some define recreation through the arts.

This diversity prompted the Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department to launch the City Arts division nearly four decades ago. It began with an emphasis on dance but grew to include drama, musical theater, music and visual arts within four years of launching in 1970.

City Arts administrator Mary Alice Kurr-Murphy came on board in the late 1970s.

"Luckily in the early years, we had a city government who recognized the need of creating a program that regular folks could enjoy and participate in creative forms of art. When a great civilization in history is remembered, it is for the art they leave behind," Kurr-Murphy says.

City Arts helms a Music Center that facilitates instruction and sponsors ensembles and a Drama Center that offers classes and performance opportunities. It also helped launch independent initiatives. The Art Alliance has classes in drawing, pottery, sculpture and other fine arts disciplines. The North Carolina Dance Project brings ballet, tap, African dance and many other forms to residents. And the Caldcleugh Multicultural Arts Center offers after-school and summer programs in the arts.

City Arts embraces the creative thought process as recreation and encourages community involvement through the arts. The number of people the agency reaches is astounding. Kurr-Murphy says the division served 155,000 residents through its programs in 2007, and she expects the numbers from 2008 to be even higher because of additions to the music program.

People from across the Triad take

classes through the City Arts division's various departments, which also are beginning to serve multigenerational participants. Residents who took classes in their youth are now enrolling their own children in the programs that once delighted them.

One of the longest-running classes offered is the 20-year-old African dance class from 7:30 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays at the Greensboro Cultural Center. More than a dozen students regularly participate in the dancing and drumming experience.

African dance instructor Dandara Boyd has taught the class for six years, and she teaches students who have been involved in the program longer than she has. Her husband, Allen Boyd, serves as master drummer/mentor each week.

"The class is a place where all different cultures come together to share the African culture. The live music is a great asset to the class. It is very interactive," says Dandara Boyd, who notes some come just to watch the fast-paced performances.

As City Arts approaches four decades as part of the Parks & Recreation Department, the ambitious plans continue. Kurr-Murphy ticks off the agenda:

- A supporter of the Eastern Music Festival, City Arts leaders would like to increase participation and continue to help bring in groups like the Peruvian jazz sextet that not only performed in the festival but also offered master classes.

- Free spoken-word poetry workshops are planned at the Parks & Recreation Department's recreation centers. The division recruited Josephus III, a spoken-word artist who performs in the Triad, to lead the workshops.

- The Drama Center will stage a children's version of "Cyrano de Bergerac." The adaptation by playwright Stephen Hyers is set in the Wild West and scheduled to be performed in March.

The diverse opportunities make it easy to see why City Arts attracts thousands of residents. Another clue the division is thriving: Every fall 2008 class was full, according to Kurr-Murphy.



Performance opportunities available through City Arts include the Greensboro Children's Theatre. The group presented "Tar Heel Tales" in April 2008 at the Weaver Academy Theatre.

Courtesy of Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department

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